

Are we nearly there yet?

As I contemplated the year ahead in the days just before taking up office as the 2000 president, I thought a lot about the Renewal process we began in 1998. The refrain, 'Are we nearly there yet?' kept buzzing in my brain. Which of us has not had the experience of a long car journey with a child who begins asking, even before you turn out of your street, 'Are we nearly there yet?' and keeps the chant up for the entire journey — or until they collapse exhausted?

For me the 'Are we nearly there yet?' refrain applied to the renewal process has led me to realise that we are 'there', or almost 'there', on much of the commitment to action we agreed to undertake in October 1998. Incorporation is within sight, we considered our name and decided to keep the one we have, the CPD program is being implemented and so on. There are, however, some areas of the Charter of Renewal where we still need to pick up the detailed work, now that we have arrived at a stage where we have a foundation for effective action on them.

The first of these areas has to do with how ALIA positions itself to become, as General Council discussed, 'the key organisation incorporating both the interests of individual information workers and the information services industry'. We feel pretty comfortable with being the key organisation for individual members but it is well-recognised that post-ACLIS it is critical to continue examining how ALIA can provide more effective support to institutions. The paper prepared by Helen Mandl and her working group on the structure of ALIA divisions included four models proposing different ways in which we can better accommodate the interests of institutions. Two more models were added by the Victorian and ACT Branches.

Conversations are currently occurring around these proposals so the views of members will begin to emerge. The time has come, however, for ALIA to start discussions with other groupings such as CASL, AIMA, CAUL, ASLA, ALCC and ADA to see where they stand. We need a better understanding of what these organisations see as their own and ALIA's role in this very turbulent information environment. This is a key part of the renewal process, which we need to pursue with vigour in 2000.

The second task where we are not 'nearly there yet' is in working through how ALIA can accommodate the decisions we have made to broaden our range of activities

on a membership base that has been declining slowly but steadily over a number of years. The obvious outcome of declining membership in an organisation which depends so heavily on membership income is, of course, less money available.

This trend is by no means unique to ALIA — information-related and other Associations internationally are experiencing a similar phenomenon. But there are some associations which are thriving, it seems because they have responded well to environmental factors and changed member expectations. An important task for ALIA this year will be to build on the 1998 Lunn and McCallum report, *Renewing services and spirit*, and to identify what are the non-negotiable services from the point of view of ALIA members and what are the optional extras.

No-one wants to see the range of services and activities trimmed — far from it — but we have to be able to sustain ALIA on a sound financial footing regardless of whether we stay as we are now, grow or decline in terms of membership and income. Belts have been tightened until there are simply no more holes past the buckle. We need to look at more fundamental issues of what defines our Association as an association and to secure these with strategies at the ready if and when required for implementation.

I recall that when I came to Australia in the mid-1970s, the Association had acquired a terrace in Surry Hills — a major milestone in the maturing of the Association. But ALIA quickly grew past the terrace house to the point where we now have a well-developed physical infrastructure with a wide range of National Office services being provided to members as well as a highly-participatory governance structure. The question is how to sustain these. There is work to be done this year, re-thinking the Association's range of support of individuals and institutions. In building and extending the renewal process we need to ensure that we have an Association in the 21st century which not only meets member needs and expectations but is sustainable.

I would like to close by thanking, on your behalf, Craig Anderson, the outgoing president. Craig worked with us through an extraordinary year with skillful chairing, good judgement and a sense of humour — very helpful from time to time! Craig led General Council in the development of a vision for a vibrant and flexible Association that will be able to adapt to the extraordinarily fluid environment in which we now have to operate. Well done, Craig! ■



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